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Conference Abstract

Unifying Community Efforts on Registration and Data Rights

Jessica Nakano‡, Holly Little‡

‡ Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, Washington, DC, United States of America

Corresponding author: Jessica Nakano (nakanojk@si.edu)

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Abstract

At the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (SI NMNH), the Assistant Registrar and Informatics Manager in the Department of Paleobiology (Paleo) have identified key linkages between registering collections (documentation for specimens and data through acquisitions, loans and disposals) and management of digitized collections, especially for usage right designation. Both roles require extensive collaboration on a shared framework for managing data related to the provenance of fossil specimens and rights associated with any derivative digital assets. This eliminated a disconnect in overlapping responsibilities: those typically siloed in museum registration practices (e.g., provenance data, intellectual property rights) and the data typically siloed in collections management and digitization workflows (e.g., data quality, digital asset management, and usage rights). Paleo shifted to a new practical approach and mindset focused on communal thinking. This propelled implementation of data standard practices and laid the building blocks for a shared community perspective on digitizing paleontological collections.

Since 2020, Paleo established processing workflows for digital asset requests of the fossil collections (new digital asset creations vs. use of existing digital assets) and baseline understandings about rights of digital assets. These products led to a comprehensive effort to outline SI NMNH's options to designate usage rights for digital assets (Table 1) and distribute basic understandings about Smithsonian Terms of Use and Smithsonian Open Access Policy (SI OA) across SI NMNH.

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Table 1.

SI NMNH Paleo's Digital Asset Rights Chart outlines the scenarios based on who created an asset, who manages the object, and available usage rights designations (Smithsonian Terms of Use or SI OA). Presented at the SPNHC 2022 Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. CC-BY 4.0.

Digital Asset Created By	Object Managed By	IP/Usage Rights Designation
SI NMNH Staff	SI NMNH	CC0 License
SI NMNH Staff	External Entity	External Entity designates
External/Non-NMNH Staff	SI NMNH	SI Terms of Use Apply with assigned SD 609 Restrictions
External/Non-NMNH Staff	SI NMNH	CC0 License with Agreement

Paleo explored this topic further by engaging in virtual meetings, conferences, presentations and informal discussions with the collections management staff and data managers across SI NMNH and externally with domestic and international groups such as the Paleo Data Working Group (PDWG), Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections (SPNHC) Registrars Group, and Biodiversity Information Standards (TDWG), to develop data standards initiatives for loans, permits and sensitive data (Fig. 1).

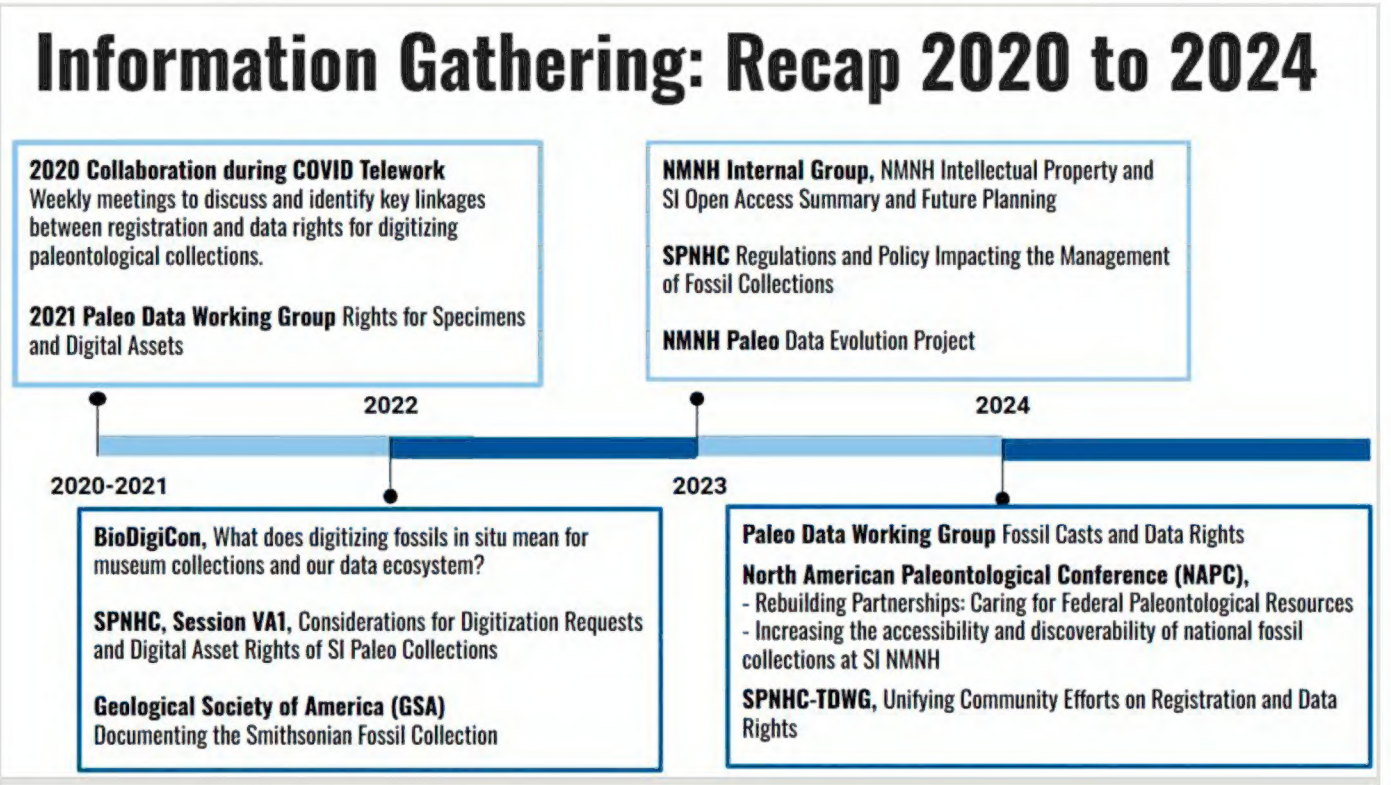

Figure 1.

Timeline of conversations, presentations, projects and engagement on topics related to data management and registration of the National Fossil Collections at the Smithsonian. CC-BY 4.0

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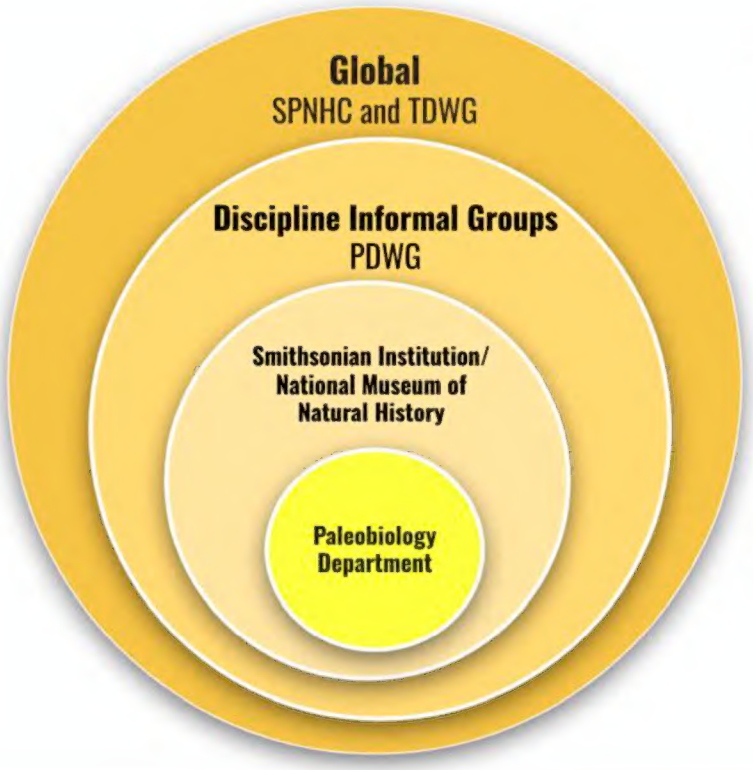
Through regular community engagement, Paleo forged a concise, yet evolving, perspective on digitizing collections, which aligned both registration and informatics data management needs within the department and museum (Fig. 2). This multi-professional perspective enables the promotion of shared community knowledge and understanding

about data rights. The primary purpose is to balance consistent goals, current needs, and long-term outcomes with the flexibility to adapt our practices based on institution-specific policies, new research methods, and varying domestic and international regulations and laws.



Interlayered Communities

- Global = SPNHC and TDWG
- Discipline Informal Groups
  - Paleo Data Working Group (PDWG)
- Smithsonian Institution (SI)/ NMNH
  - SI Digitization Program Office (DPO)
  - SI Open Access Initiative
  - NMNH Office of the Registrar and Registrar User Group
  - NMNH IDSC and NMNH DigiComm
  - NMNH Intellectual Property and Open Access Group
  - NMNH Office of Photo and Media
- Department of Paleobiology
  - Collections Management Staff
    - Dedicated Paleo Assistant Registrar
    - Dedicated Paleo Informatics Manager
  - Curators and Researchers

Figure 2.

Visualization of interlayered communities and their various degrees of involvement when discussing data standards and registration needs. CC-BY 4.0

The notable outcomes from almost four years of work are highlighted and incorporated into Paleo's departmental policy and documentation requirements for processing and fulfilling digital asset creation or use requests workflows and distribution of this information to the public website for visitors and borrowers.

However, there are still persisting challenges related to registering and managing these digital assets. There are immediate and future obstacles such as: limitations in effective tracking methods to record creation of digital assets, use of digital assets, and designation of what usage rights and when the decision was made; gaps in community practice, policy and regulations at the institutional level and globally; past practices in workflows and staff structures or lack thereof, which have left digital assets in limbo without means of accessing the data or documentation to identify the appropriate use options and rights.

We see a need to continue asking questions. How are varying policies across institutions globally, impacting compliance concerns in registration for sharing sensitive information with other research institutions? How have or will new research techniques and opportunities impact the need for flexibility in practices and decisions? Are there alternative ways to utilize a Collections Management Systems (CMS) or use other platforms to track, store and manage the digital assets? How have others engaged in

community discussions to address overlapping needs for data standards and registration of digitized collections?

These identify significant inconsistencies across the community that need further discussion with subject-matter experts before effective and comprehensive decisions in data standards for managing digitized collections can be made.

Ultimately, there are outstanding questions and challenges at all stages for registering, digitizing and managing digital assets of natural history collections. We continue to unveil nuances in thinking about this topic and find the need for structures of shared knowledge built and actively engaged in by a professionally diverse community. The utilization of subject-matter experts encourages collaboration and alternative perspectives to standardize operations and policy while expanding community efforts and awareness.

Keywords

paleontology, data manager, digital assets, natural history collections, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History

Presenting author

Jessica Nakano

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.